

Crucial Need for Communicative Approaches and Intercultural Communication in Teaching English at Iranian Schools in Government Sector

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Abstract

ICC has recently been the interest of many language teachers and methodologists all over the world. At Iranian schools in government sector, EFL teachers only use prescribed textbooks in which we find very little or no foreign language community culture, and if there is any cultural point, it is only about the learners' own culture. But in private language institutes using books published by native speakers helps students be familiar with the culture of people whose language they learn. After a thorough and careful review of the textbooks and the methods teachers use for teaching English in government sector, the researcher found that teachers at government schools never use communicative approaches in the classroom. The major implication of this study concerns the need to use textbooks which address the needs of students for modern textbooks especially the ones which may introduce foreign language culture. The researcher believes that it is necessary to go 'up' to the level of policy-making: because of the great emphasis on teaching structural or formal grammatical features in the classroom. There must be a serious reviewing of the Iranian curriculum in English language teaching to introduce intercultural communication to meet the realistic need of the new generation of language learners in our schools.

Keywords: EFL, textbooks, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

Any educational system is composed of five important components (students, a teacher, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation) which are closely interrelated. Even in the context of communicative language teaching, teachers and learners tend to rely heavily on prescribed textbooks which are still a staple in most of EFL classes. While language teachers

often teach based on informal analyses of their learners' needs (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Cunningsworth (1984) suggests, "course materials for English should be seen as the teacher's servant and not his master" (p. 15).

Using only textbooks is not sufficient to meet students' needs and motivation for learning the language. Instructors need to strike a balance between creative instruction and being a slave to their texts (Garinger, 2002). The problem, however, is when external pressures lead teachers into using particular ways to teach prescribed textbooks. Indeed, teachers must not be slaves to their texts, but it is usually the case that they have little choice because of social demands largely due to the pedagogical culture of the specific ELT classrooms (Reflections on English Language Teaching, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 131–139).

In Iran, educational policies for all classes in government schools are decided primarily by the central government. All of the decisions made by the central government are passed down through provincial organizations for implementation at lower levels which have less or no authority in decision-making. All major educational policies concerning the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system and so on, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

Students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks, Jahangard (2007). Teachers, even if they are familiar with the foreign language culture, cannot make use of any intercultural communications in government schools. Actually there is no place for foreign language culture and intercultural communication in Iranian English language textbooks. The main focus is to make students be able to read and get ready for tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books.

In another study, Namaghi (2006) says that there are sociopolitical forces which help determine teachers' work in Iran. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, their input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have positive wash back on teaching and learning. Third, since a higher score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by grade pressures from students, parents and school principals. As a result, Namaghi argues, teachers become mere implementers of prescribed initiatives and schemes without recourse to their own professional knowledge and experience. This study seeks to find out how our textbooks can be modified by comparing the behaviors of students at government schools with those of the learners who attend private institutes and learn English in classroom settings and through textbooks and methods which are not directly controlled by the government.

1.1 Culture in Iranian School English Textbooks

The major difference between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) context is that in an ESL context, English is the partial or universal medium of instruction in some or most subjects in school, while in an EFL context instruction in other subjects is not normally given in English (Prator 1991). In Iran, recently, there has been a change and English teaching starts from the 1st grade of junior high schools. The Ministry of Education compiles, develops and publishes textbooks and teaching materials for public and private high schools nationwide. Thus, all high schools follow the same curriculum standards. But still English education focuses on reading skills in order to help students read and translate materials written in English. The curriculum in general, thus, is aimed at promoting students' grammar knowledge in reading and translation. Consequently, high school English teachers have to use methods to some extent similar to grammar translation to meet the expectations of the national curriculum. The revised curriculum for high school English education recently seems to have put a little emphasis on communicative competence. Nevertheless, it is still far from being called 'communicative'. Teachers continue to use the

grammar translation method through textbooks which lack listening and speaking activities and deploy grammatical exercises disguising as 'writing' activities (Hosseini, 2007).

In spite of all restrictions, thanks to training language teachers at the universities and the original books about modern methods of language teaching presented in our universities, there are hopes that language teaching approaches its ultimate goals that are both teaching the language and culture through intercultural communication.

1.2 Theoretical Background

1.2.1 Correlation of Language and Culture in Foreign Language Teaching Materials

Culture is inseparable from language. It is actually inevitable to ignore the role of intercultural communication in interacting with people everywhere in the world. It is now believed that learning the language does not guarantee learning the culture. We can learn a lot of cultural features, but we may not be able to learn how to behave in certain situations. Culture as the fifth language skill teaches us to adapt our use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use language to accept difference, to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different to ours.

Why should we consider the teaching of a cultural skills set as part of language teaching and why should we consider it a fifth language skill, in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing? I think there are two reasons. One is the international role of the English language and the other is globalization. (Barry Tomalin, 2008)

The second argument, Tomalin adds, is globalization itself. You could say, 'We are all internationalists now'. We are or will be dealing with foreigners in our community, going abroad more, dealing at a distance with foreigners through outsourcing or email, phone and video-conferencing. And this isn't just for adults. Kids are interchanging experience and information through travel, key pal schemes and networks like Facebook. This is the time to develop the intercultural skills that will serve them in adult life.

1.2.2 Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence was introduced by Hymes in the 1970s to understand first language acquisition, it was necessary to take into account not only how grammatical competence but also the ability to use language appropriately were acquired, thus placing emphasis on sociolinguistic competence among native speakers. This idea was applied to foreign language acquisition in North America by Canale and Swain (1980) and by Van Ek (1986) in Europe, and turned it into a fundamental concept in the development of communicative language teaching. The aim of communicative methodology was to acquire the necessary skills to communicate in socially and culturally appropriate ways, and, in the learning process, focus was placed on functions, role playing and real situations, among other aspects. Canale and Swain (1980) suggested that communicative competence was minimally composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence (1980: 27–31):

1.2.3 Grammatical Competence

Grammatical competence includes the knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics, and phonology.

1.2.4 Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is made up of two different sets of rules-that is-Sociocultural competence and discourse. The former focuses on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions are appropriate within a given sociocultural context, and the extent to which appropriate attitude and register or style are conveyed by a particular

grammatical form within a given sociocultural context. Rules of discourse are concerned with cohesion and coherence of groups of utterances.

1.2.5 Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is made up of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that the speaker may resort to when breakdowns in communication take place due to performance variables or to insufficient competence. These strategies may relate to grammatical competence (how to paraphrase, how to simplify, etc.) or to sociolinguistic competence (for instance, how to address strangers when unsure of their social status). They also insisted on the need to establish communicative interaction with “highly competent speakers” of the language so that learners would be able to respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations. On the other hand, they then suggest that learners should be taught about the second language culture in order to provide them with the sociocultural knowledge of the second language necessary to infer the social meanings or values of utterances.

1.2.6 Intercultural Communicative Competence

We have been looking for a suitable model for the foreign language learner, but have not been able to agree on an acceptable one. According to what is reviewed, if the NS is not considered an appropriate model for the FL learner, communicative competence is not considered a suitable approach too. So what the learner would be acquiring is believed to be intercultural competence (IC) or intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

1.2.7 Culture and Civilization

The major objective of language learning nowadays is making people all over the world civilized. So sometimes the terms civilization and culture are considered interchangeable which shows how much intercultural communication can be important in any foreign language teaching setting. Wei (2011) believes that the content of the word pair of ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’ is synonymous and even interchangeable in meaning in a very salient aspect. For instance, when the specific thinking and behavioral modes of a people or an aggregation of peoples or ethnic groups are being discussed, both ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ can be used.

3. Research Method Introduction

The method of this study is based on describing and analyzing data. English language teaching textbooks at government sector in Iran never considers culture in language classes or gives a vague and general definition of it. Eventually as mentioned, high school textbooks as a reliable source of study have been chosen for this study. The research objective is to analyze the content of these books from cultural point of view. At private language institutes, New Interchange book series have been chosen for this study because they are original books which have been published by native language publishers, available for all language learners, and they are suitable for age groups of 14-18. Hence they are considered as a reliable source of comparison.

3.1 Materials

3.1.1 Three Iranian high school ELT textbooks which are published by the Ministry of Education were selected as local textbooks for analysis. The list of the books is as follows:

3.1.1.1 Birjandi, P., Soheili, A., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2012). English Book 1. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

3.1.1.2 Birjandi, P., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2012). English Book 2. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

3.1.1.3 Birjandi, P., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2012). English Book 3. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

3.1.2 Interchange Third Edition series, a revised edition of New Interchange, under the rubric of CDA. The series includes 4 books all of which are considered for analysis. The series is one of the most successful ESL textbooks around the world and is very popular in Iran. New interchange series also have been investigated by some researchers.

3.2 Procedures

Next a questionnaire was given to two groups of English language teachers to comment on the content of the textbooks from cultural point of view. Since teachers' roles are as important as textbooks, the opinions of 20 teachers in each group were collected and analyzed. Another objective of the questionnaire was to determine language learners' interests and the critical role of presenting culture in motivating language learners to critical thinking and their desire to learn English from teachers' perspective. This questionnaire was composed of 25 items and each item had five options, 1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4- strongly disagree, 5- no comment. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by skillful language teachers and their comments have been considered.

3.3 Discussion and Conclusion

Textbooks can be presented in a way which suggests that the materials are authoritative and definitive or are in an intercultural and critical perspective. When teachers wish to emphasize intercultural skills, they can start from the theme and content in the textbook, and after that they can encourage learners to ask further questions and make comparisons. Themes presented in textbooks can lend themselves to creation of an intercultural and critical perspective. The major objective should be to make learners compare the theme in a familiar situation with examples from an unfamiliar context. Textbooks need to directly or indirectly communicate sets of cultural values. Cunningsworth (1995) calls this 'hidden curriculum'.

According to Newby (1997) and Freebairn (2000) (cited in Skopinskaja 2003, p.42), "most foreign language textbooks used in secondary education in European countries fall into two categories: international/global textbooks and locally produced textbooks". The first type includes teaching materials that are produced for the international market. According to Pulverness (1995, p.7), such textbooks "are centered on topics with fairly broad transcultural appeal" and contain material that could be set anywhere. Because of their universal nature they are widely used. Cunningsworth (1984, p.62) maintains that "the relative lack of culture specificity and transparent situations for presentation of language items make such material readily acceptable in almost any country of the world". Local textbooks, on the other hand, include materials that conform to the requirements of the national curriculum of a particular country. Local textbooks, comprising an odd combination of language systematic data and local schematic knowledge and being widely used by public schools, are an important part of general school curricula and usually develop learners' awareness of their own cultural identity as well as including material that promote learners' awareness of the target culture (Skopinskaja 2003).

3.4 Findings

In IC, individuals have the ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture, drawing upon their knowledge about intercultural communication, their attitudes of interest in otherness and their skills in interpreting, relating and discovering; whereas in ICC, interaction takes place between people from different cultures and countries in an FL, the knowledge of the participants of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately and their awareness of the specific meaning, values and connotations of the language. Therefore IC can and should be acquired by people from all walks of life and involved in any kind of trade; however, when dealing with FL teaching and learning, it is ICC that we must aim at, as the focus is mostly on

linguistic aspects and, in this context, “communicative” is normally identified with “linguistic” (Risager 2000: 14).

When people from different languages and/or countries interact socially they bring to the situation their knowledge about their own country and that of the others’. The need for such interaction proves the necessity of presenting foreign language culture in comparison with the learners’ own culture. At the same time, both aspects, knowledge and attitude, are influenced by the processes of intercultural communication, that is to say, the skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures and the skills of discovery and interaction.

The researchers found out that students attending private language institutes were highly motivated and eager to learn the language and culture simultaneously, so they hope that this study will give helpful guidelines to the authors of textbooks in the preparation of new materials for language learners and will have great feedback and eventually will promote language learning conditions in Iran. It demonstrates that Iranian foreign language textbooks need an essential revision. It also helps language teachers in accelerating language teaching process and motivating their students as well.

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